

Movies

Albert Brooks: All mediums well done | Acting in 'Drive,' writing in '2030'



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

Killing it everywhere: Albert Brooks is earning critical acclaim for his work in *Drive* and for his novel *2030: The Real Story of What Happens in America*.

By Susan Wloszczyna
USA TODAY

TORONTO — Considering how adroitly Albert Brooks turns innocent silverware into lethal weaponry in the new film *Drive*, it is a relief to see that there are no utensils on the restaurant table where he is seated.

"That was at my request," he says, smiling. Apparently, he can no longer wield a fork with impunity.

As a stand-up comic, actor and influential filmmaker (1985's *Lost in America* remains the quintessential yuppie-era takedown), Brooks has specialized in nebbishy worrywarts and kvetching underdogs. Typical was his Oscar-nominated role as a brainy TV reporter who memorably sweats through his suit while flopping as a fill-in anchor in 1986's *Broadcast News*.

But in the stylized action thriller *Drive*, his Bernie Rose is the type of heavy who makes others perspire — especially when he targets Ryan Gosling's silent but deadly wheelman after a heist goes awry. At least he has a brazen sense of humor as he dines on Chinese takeout in an Italian eatery.

The lauded performance arrives on the heels of another uncommon Brooks enterprise: *2030: The Real Story of What Happens in America*, a scary futuristic novel that made best-seller lists and is out in paperback in January. Suddenly, this 64-year-old funnyman is hot. Hot enough to attract Oscar buzz again. Does he feel hot?

"Do I look feverish?" he jokes. "My neck itches. Listen, it comes and goes. The book was a great thing. It was a new field, and it happened to come this year with this cool movie. I spent two years writing a book, where most people I ran into thought I was dead. So it's nice to come back and say, 'I'm still living.'"

But hot? He says not. "My first Steve Allen show was in the fall of 1968,"



By Richard Foreman Jr., FilmDistrict

No typecasting here: Albert Brooks as the menacing Bernie Rose in *Drive*.

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back when he was doing his live comedy act on TV. "So I don't think at this point those words apply anymore."

Brooks, who played an inept crook in 1998's *Out of Sight*, came up with a back story for brutal Bernie. "I don't think he has killed anyone in 30 years, and he's angry that he is forced to clean this whole thing up at the risk of his own life," he says. Has he ever met anyone who might be willing to kill? "I'm sure I have. I was working nightclubs for a long time."

Brooks' career has pretty much been at low tide since 2005, when his pseudo-doc *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* failed to find an audience. Since then, he was a voice in *The Simpsons* movie in 2007 and appeared on Showtime's *Weeds* in 2008.

But his earlier work made a lasting impression on director Nicolas Winding Refn, the 40-year-old Dane whose

films (*Valhalla Rising*, *Bronson*) portray violence on an operatic scale. "I remember seeing *Lost in America* when I was young in the '80s, and I always liked him," says Refn. "I wanted Albert for *Drive*, but I never met him. So he came by my house, and I sensed he was such a powerhouse of emotions. He is like a volcano. And all my preconceived notions came true. But on top of that, I realized eventually this man will kill somebody — so let's do it in a movie."

There is a reason why Refn might have felt that way. According to Brooks, "He said something cute, that when he was younger and saw *Lost in America*, he got scared when I yelled at my wife. I scared a 14-year-old boy." The actor proceeded to scare him again — in person. "I pinned him up against the wall just to say, 'How violent do you want?' I just wanted to say, 'I'm strong enough to do what you need.' I don't think Nicolas has ever been in a fight in his life. I think all of his fights take place on-screen."

The Brooksian momentum continues next year with his role as Paul Rudd's father in Judd Apatow's untitled follow-up to his 2007 hit *Knocked Up*. What about his own kids, Jacob, who turns 13 in October, and Claire, who is 11?

Surely they are proud that he spoke for the father fish in *Finding Nemo*? "It's very low on what is important to them now," says Brooks, who has been married to artist Kimberly Shlain since 1997. "They love me and they are proud of me, but they're not thinking about my career."

His son was hoping that his dad's fame might be an advantage at school. "One of his teachers knows all of the movies, and he thinks that will give him a better grade. I said, 'It won't.'"

Dissatisfaction is the unlikely theme of Season 2

Continued from 1D

Sopranos writer Terence Winter, the series' creator.

Considering that Ken Burns' latest PBS documentary, *Prohibition*, is premiering Oct. 2, why the fascination with the hangover induced by the 18th Amendment, which ushered in the decade and *Boardwalk*'s first season?

The improbability makes it a compelling subject, says Daniel Okrent, author of *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, published last year.

"The minute you stop to think about the fact that for 14 years it was against the law to buy a glass of beer in this country, it becomes impossible to believe; it doesn't make any sense," he says. "And it's really not taught in schools. It gets treated as an aberration that's more worth forgetting than remembering."

Burns says backers of Prohibition could never have anticipated its side effects: "They could not see organized crime, female alcoholism because of the emergence of speakeasies and the corruption of institutions, and how that would impact on ordinary lives."

Winter has a modern-day analogy in mind. "You're taking these young ambitious thugs who want to make a lot of money quickly, and all they have to do is sell this illegal substance that a lot of people feel should be legal anyway. It's pretty much a perfect template for the drug business."

\$5 million tab per episode

Whether or not they see that parallel, viewers have been eager to take a walk on the ambitious and expensive *Boardwalk*. It's HBO's No. 2 current series, behind *True Blood*, with an average audience of 3.2 million for Sunday premieres that balloons to nearly 11 million once repeats, on-demand and DVR-delayed viewing are included.

Its production is lavish, with a price tag to match. Each episode costs more than \$5 million and takes 15 days to film, double the figures for a typical network drama. An elaborate boardwalk set, built in a Brooklyn parking lot, cost \$2 million alone. "It seems like I'm shooting one big, long movie," Buscemi says.

Most surprising to the star is that "a lot of young people like the show, and I didn't necessarily think it would appeal to people in their 20s. I thought the time period would be a turn-off — maybe because it's in color — I'm serious — it doesn't feel like it's old."

Much of last season's action



By Macall Polay, HBO

"There's a challenge in crafting a story as big and as layered as *Boardwalk*."

... I find myself as a viewer almost forgetting it takes place in the 1920s."

— Michael Lombardo, HBO programming president

centered on the advent of Prohibition and how Thompson and gangsters in Chicago and New York jumped into the fray to profit, and jockey for turf.

Nucky's chief foe was Nelson Van Alden (Michael Shannon), an odd-duck federal agent who took up with — and impregnated — showgirl Lucy Danziger (Paz de la Huerta), whom Nucky had cast aside in favor of Irish immigrant Margaret Schroder (Kelly Macdonald).

Now Nucky's partners in crime, including brother Eli (Shea Whigham), protégé Jimmy Darmody (Michael Pitt) and mentor "Commodore" Louis Kaestner (Dabney Coleman), are conspiring against him to seize control of the liquor business.

"He was under attack by Van Alden and the forces against alcohol," Buscemi says, "and now he's kind of under attack from the people who were his allies, so there's a power struggle. The stakes are even higher because of the unpredictability of the people who used to work for him; he knows what they're capable of."

Winter says he "wanted to really amp up the pressure on Nucky." Sunday's premiere opens with the 1920 Irving Berlin song *After You Get What You Want, You Don't Want It*, "which is sort of thematically the whole Season 2," he says. "On one

hand, everybody has sort of gotten everything; Margaret has moved up in the world and is living with Nucky, they're a family; Nucky's firmly in control, things should be booming, they should be great for everybody — and of course they're not.

"Everyone's dissatisfied, and the conspiracy that was laid down last season is now coming to fruition. It's putting Nucky under enormous pressure (by) having him question who was on his side and who wasn't."

Except for that wary truce with Rothstein. Though "they're certainly not friends, they are friendlier," Buscemi says. "They can appreciate each other and their positions, and how hard it is to stay in those positions."

Producer/director Tim Van Patten, who like Buscemi is a *Sopranos* alum, says this season is "darker and bigger in scope" than the first, which mostly concerned itself with the advent of Prohibition: "It's all about loyalty and betrayal."

A lot of story, characters

Plots will delve more deeply into characters' personal lives, and Margaret's reconciliation with Nucky has domesticated him in a new Atlantic City home.

"At the start of the season, they're on more of an even footing," says Macdonald, who was an Emmy nominee (as was Bus-

semi). "She's very helpful to Nucky." But she's still uncomfortable with her trade-off, and by the season's end, domestic bliss begins to fray.

The Scottish actress says the Irish immigrant is tricky to play. "Margaret talks differently than the other characters; she sounds a bit like Yoda, with shorter sentences," she says. "And I've been trying to get (her) to sit back in a chair and it's just impossible; Margaret can't relax."

Jack Huston is now a series regular as Richard Harrow, the tragic World War I hero who lost half his face and is now a hitman for fellow vet Jimmy. "This season, we get to discover a lot more about Richard and who he is," says Huston, part of an acting dynasty that includes great-grandfather Walter and aunt Anjelica. "It's an emotional ride; he's come back to a world he doesn't fit into anymore, and that's why he focuses so much on his gun and killing people. That's what he knows."

And the already-large cast adds new characters: Owen Slater (Charlie Cox), an aide to Nucky; George Remus (Glenn Fleshler), a powerful real-life Cincinnati bootlegger; and Esther Randolph (Julianne Nicholson), a dogged prosecutor. Thompson is a fictionalized version of Nucky Johnson, whose exploits controlling Atlantic City were chronicled in the book of the same name on which the series is partly based.

"It is a complicated show," Winter says, with "a lot of characters and a lot of story going on."

You can't balance a checkbook while you're watching."

HBO programming president Michael Lombardo concedes, "There's a challenge in crafting a story as big and as layered as *Boardwalk*." The period setting is "a strong suit, but also a distraction from the relatability of the characters." Still, "I find myself as a viewer almost forgetting it takes place in the 1920s."

How will it all end? "I would love to do six or seven seasons," Winter says. "There are so many interesting characters, and it's such a rich period." But the series might end with the stock market crash of 1929, the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, or merely another momentous event in the life of the fictional Nucky.

By then, Scorsese, an active consultant, might be back to direct. "His attention to detail is unbelievable," Winter says. "This is a guy I grew up idolizing. He was the reason I got into the business. *Taxi Driver* changed everything for me, and working with him is a dream come true."

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